

The Legend of Rheineck

Folk-Lore And Legends: German

German

Intermediate
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Graf Ulric Von Rheineck was a very wild youth. Recklessly and without consideration did he plunge into every excess. Dissipation grew to be the habit of his life, and no sensual indulgence did he deny himself which could be procured by any means whatever. Amply provided for as he was, the revenues of his wide possessions, which comprehended Thal Rheineck, and the adjacent country, to the shore of the Rhine, and as far as the mouth of the Aar, were soon discovered to be insufficient for all his absorbing necessities. One by one his broad lands were alienated from him, piece after piece of that noble possession fell from his house, until finally he found himself without a single inch of ground which he could call his own, save the small and unproductive spot on which Rheineck stood. This he had no power to transfer, or perhaps it would have gone with the remainder. The castle had fallen sadly into disrepair, through his protracted absence from home, and his continual neglect of it,—indeed there was scarcely a habitable room within its precincts, and he now had no means to make it the fitting abode of any one, still less of a nobleman of his rank and consequence. All without, as well as all within it, was desolate and dreary to the last degree. The splendid garden, previously the pride of his ancestors, was overrun with weeds, and tangled with parasites and creepers. The stately trees, which once afforded shelter and shade, as well as fruits of the finest quality and rarest kinds, were all dying or withered, or had their growth obstructed by destroying plants. The outer walls were in a ruinous condition, the fortifications were everywhere fallen into decay, and the alcoves and summer-houses had dropped down, or were roofless, and exposed to the weather. It was a cheerless prospect to contemplate, but he could not now help himself, even if he had the will to do so. Day after day the same scene of desolation presented itself to his

eyes, night after night did the same cheerless chamber present itself to his view. It was his own doing. That he could not deny, and bitterly he rued it. To crown his helplessness and misery, his vassals and domestic servants abandoned him by degrees, one after another, and at last he was left entirely alone in the house of his fathers—a hermit in that most dismal of all solitudes, the desolate scene of one's childish, one's happiest recollections.

One evening about twilight, as he sat at the outer gate, looking sadly on the broad, bright river which flowed calmly beneath, he became aware of the presence of a stranger, who seemed to toil wearily up the steep acclivity on the summit of which the castle is situated. The stranger—an unusual sight within those walls then—soon reached the spot where Ulric sat, and, greeting the youth in the fashion of the times, prayed him for shelter during the night, and refreshment after his most painful journey.

“I am,” quoth the stranger, “a poor pilgrim on my way to Cologne, where, by the merits of the three wise kings—to whose shrine I am bound—I hope to succeed in the object of my journey.”

Graf Ulric von Rheineck at once accorded him the hospitality he required, for though he had but scant cheer for himself, and nought of comfort to bestow, he had still some of the feeling of a gentleman left in him.

“I am alone here now,” said he to the pilgrim, with a deep sigh. “I am myself as poor as Job. Would it were not so! My menials have left me to provide for themselves, as I can no longer provide for them. ‘Twas ever the way of the world, and I blame them not for it. The last departed yesterday. He was an old favourite of my father's, and he once thought that he would not leave my service but with his life. We must now look to ourselves, however,—at least so he said. But that has nothing to do with the matter, so enter, my friend.”

They entered. By their joint exertions a simple evening meal was soon made ready, and speedily spread forth on a half-rotten plank, their only table.

“I have no better to offer you,” observed the young Count, “but I offer you what I have with right goodwill. Eat, if you can, and be merry.”

They ate in silence, neither speaking during the meal.

“Surely,” said the pilgrim, when it was over,—“surely it may not be that the extensive cellars of this great castle

contain not a single cup of wine for the weary wayfarer.”

The Count was at once struck by the idea. It seemed to him as if he had never thought of it before, though in reality he had ransacked every corner of the cellars more than once.

“Come, let us go together and try,” continued the pilgrim; “it will go hard with us if we find nought to wash down our homely fare.”

Accompanied by his persuasive guest, the Count descended to the vaults, where the wines of Rheineck had been stored for ages. Dark and dreary did they seem to him. A chill fell on his soul as he strode over the mouldy floor.

“Here,” said the pilgrim, with great glee,—“here, here! Look ye, my master, look ye! See! I have found a cup of the best.”

The Count passed into a narrow cellar whither the pilgrim had preceded him. There stood his companion beside a full butt of burgundy, holding in his hand a massive silver cup, foaming over with the generous beverage, and with the other he pointed exultingly to his prize. The scene seemed like a dream to Ulric. The place was wholly unknown to him. The circumstances were most extraordinary. He mused a moment, but he knew not what to do in the emergency.

“We will enjoy ourselves here,” said the pilgrim. “Here, on this very spot, shall we make us merry! Ay, here, beside this noble butt of burgundy. See, ’tis the best vintage! Let us be of good cheer!”

The Count and his boon companion sat down on two empty casks, and a third served them for a table. They plied the brimming beakers with right goodwill; they drank with all their might and main. The Count became communicative, and talked about his private affairs, as men in liquor will. The pilgrim, however, preserved a very discreet silence, only interrupting by an occasional interjection of delight, or an opportune word of encouragement to his garrulous friend.

“I’ll tell you what,” began the pilgrim, when the Count had concluded his tale,—“I’ll tell you what. Listen: I know a way to get you out of your difficulties, to rid you of all your embarrassments.”

[Pg 41]The Count looked at him incredulously for a moment; his eye could not keep itself steady for a longer

space of time. There was something in the pilgrim's glance as it met his that greatly dissipated his unbelief, and he inquired of him how these things could be brought about.

"But, mayhap," continued the pilgrim, apparently disregarding the manifest change in his companion's impressions regarding him,— "mayhap you would be too faint-hearted to follow my advice if I gave it you."

The Count sprang on his feet in a trice, and half-unsheathed his sword to avenge this taunt on his manhood, but the pilgrim looked so unconcerned, and evinced so little emotion at this burst of anger, that the action and its result were merely momentary. Ulric resumed his seat, and the pilgrim proceeded—

"You tell me that you once heard from your father, who had it from his father, that your great-grandfather, in the time when this castle was beleaguered by the Emperor Conrad, buried a vast treasure in some part of it, but which part his sudden death prevented him from communicating to his successor?"

The Count nodded acquiescence.

"It is even so," he said.

"In Eastern lands have I learned to discover where concealed treasures are hidden," pursued the pilgrim; "and——"

The Count grasped him by the hand.

"Find them," he cried,— "find them for me, and a full half is thine! Oh, there is gold, and there are diamonds and precious stones of all kinds. They are there in abundance. My father said so! 'Tis true, 'tis true! Find them, find them, and then shall this old hall ring once more with the voice of merriment. Then shall we live! ay, we shall live! that we shall."

The pilgrim did not attempt to interrupt his ecstasies, or to interpose between him and the excess of his glee, but let him excite himself to the highest pitch with pictures of the pleasing future, until they had acquired almost the complexion of fact and the truth of reality for his distracted imagination. When he had exhausted himself, the wily tempter resumed—

"Oh yes, I know it all. I know where the treasure is. I can put your finger on it if I like. I was present when the

old man buried it in the——”

“You present!” exclaimed Ulric, his hair standing on end with horror, for he had no doubts of the truth of the mysterious stranger’s statements,—”you present!”

“Yes,” resumed the pilgrim; “I was present.”

“But he is full a hundred years dead and buried,” continued the Count.

“No matter for that, no matter for that,” replied the guest abruptly; “many and many a time have we drunk and feasted and revelled together in this vault—ay, in this very vault.”

The Count knew not what to think, still less what to reply to this information. He could not fail to perceive its improbability, drunk as he was, but still he could not, for the life of him, discredit it.

“But,” added the pilgrim, “trouble not yourself with that at present which you have not the power to comprehend, and speculate not on my proceedings, but listen to my words, and follow my advice, if you will that I should serve you in the matter.”

The Count was silent when the stranger proceeded.

“This is Walpurgis night,” he said. “All the spirits of earth and sea and sky are now abroad on their way to the Brocken. Hell is broke loose, you know, for its annual orgies on that mountain. When the castle clock tolls twelve go you into the chapel, and proceed to the graves of your grandfather, your great-grandfather, and your great-great-grandfather; take from their coffins the bones of their skeletons—take them all, mind ye. One by one you must then remove them into the moonlight, outside the walls of the building, and there lay them softly on the bit of green sward which faces to the south. This done, you must next place them in the order in which they lay in their last resting-place. When you have completed that task, you must return to the chapel, and in their coffins you will find the treasures of your forefathers. No one has power over an atom of them, until the bones of those who in spirit keep watch and ward over them shall have been removed from their guardianship. So long as they rest on them, or oversee them, to the dead they belong. It is a glorious prize. ‘Twill be the making of you, man, for ever!”

Ulric was shocked at the proposal. To desecrate the graves of his fathers was a deed which made him shudder,

and, bad as he was, the thought filled him with the greatest horror, but the temptation was irresistible.

At the solemn hour of midnight he proceeded to the chapel, accompanied by the pilgrim. He entered the holy place with trembling, for his heart misgave him. The pilgrim stayed without, apparently anxious and uneasy as to the result of the experiment about to be made. To all the solicitations of the Count for assistance in his task he turned a deaf ear; nothing that he could say could induce him to set foot within the chapel walls.

Ulric opened the graves in the order in which they were situated, beginning with the one first from the door of the chapel. He proceeded to remove the rotting remains from their mouldering coffins. One by one did he bear their bleached bones into the open air, as he had been instructed, and placed them as they had lain in their narrow beds, under the pale moonbeams, on the plot of green sward facing the south, outside the chapel walls. The coffins were all cleared of their tenants, except one which stood next to the altar, at the upper end of the aisle. Ulric approached this also to perform the wretched task he had set himself, the thoughts of the treasure he should become possessed of but faintly sustaining his sinking soul in the fearful operation. Removing the lid of this last resting-place of mortality, his heart failed him at the sight he beheld. There lay extended, as if in deep sleep, the corpse of a fair child, fresh and comely, as if it still felt and breathed and had lusty being. The weakness Ulric felt was but momentary. His companion called aloud to him to finish his task quickly, or the hour would have passed when his labour would avail him. As he touched the corpse of the infant the body stirred as if it had sensation. He shrank back in horror as the fair boy rose gently in his coffin, and at length stood upright within it.

“Bring back yon bones,” said the phantom babe,—“bring back yon bones; let them rest in peace in the last home of their fathers. The curse of the dead will be on you otherwise. Back! back! bring them back ere it be too late.”

The corpse sank down in the coffin again as it uttered these words, and Ulric saw a skeleton lying in its place. Shuddering, he averted his gaze, and turned it towards the chapel door, where he had left his companion. But, horror upon horror! as he looked he saw the long, loose, dark outer garment fall from the limbs of the pilgrim. He saw his form dilate and expand in height and in breadth, until his head seemed to touch the pale crescent moon, and his bulk shut out from view all beyond itself. He saw his eyes firing and flaming like globes of lurid light, and he saw his hair and beard converted into one mass of living flame. The fiend stood revealed in all his hideous deformity.

His hands were stretched forth to fasten on the hapless Count, who, with vacillating step, like the bird under the eye of the basilisk, involuntarily, though with a perfect consciousness of his awful situation, and the fearful fate which awaited him, every moment drew nearer and nearer to him. The victim reached the chapel door—he felt all the power of that diabolical fascination—another step and he would be in the grasp of the fiend who grinned to clutch him. But the fair boy who spoke from the grave suddenly appeared once more, and, flinging himself between the wretched Count and the door, obstructed his further progress.

“Avaunt, foul fiend!” spake the child, and his voice was like a trumpet-note; “avaunt to hell! He is no longer thine. Thou hast no power over him. Your hellish plot has failed. He is free, and shall live and repent.”

As he said this he threw his arms around Ulric and the Count became, as it were, at once surrounded by a beatific halo, which lighted up the chapel like day. The fiend fled howling like a wild beast disappointed of its prey.

The remains of his ancestors were again replaced in their coffins by the Count, long ere the morning broke, and on their desecrated graves he poured forth a flood of repentant tears. With the dawn of day he quitted the castle of Rheineck. It is said that he traversed the land in the garb of a lowly mendicant, subsisting on the alms of the charitable, and it is likewise told that he did penance at every holy shrine from Cologne to Rome, whither he was bound to obtain absolution for his sins. Years afterwards he was found dead at the foot of the ancient altar in the ruined chapel. The castle went to ruin, and for centuries nought ever dwelt within its walls save the night-birds and the beasts of prey.

Of the original structure the ruins of one old tower are all that now remain. It is still firmly believed by the

peasants of the neighbourhood, that in the first and the last quarter of the moon the spirit of Ulric, the last of the old lords of Rheineck, still sweeps around the ruin at the hour of midnight, and is occasionally visible to belated wanderers.

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